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Summary:

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Just This Once

Author's Note:

- For [xJuniperx](#).

Happy Belated Birthday to the one, the only. I apologize that this came late, but I hope you will appreciate me diving into another pairing that is your jam while not particularly mine. The great Harringrove story will have to be written by our mutual friend (or you!), but in the meantime, a very short fic for the tail end of the Festival of Jackie.

You are a wonderful friend, an amazing reader, and one of the very best people that I know. You deserve all the fics, and all the love, and all the cats.

PS. Apologies in advance for the lack of smut. Next time, my friend.

—

They had a bad habit of meeting on the road to Wannamaker.

It was the stretch of road that most people didn't take. When people came to and from Hawkins, they took the south highway. But Wannamaker was to the east, and it was where the train came in, where Steve's dad had his second office, where he went to make pick ups, so it didn't exactly make sense to take the highway. No, instead he was driving on a road that was occasionally gravel and occasionally one lane and if someone came at you in the middle of the night without their headlights on, then you might kind of be screwed.

But that was rare, though. Because it seemed like Steve and Billy Hargrove were the only two people who actually took the stupid road.

Steve was driving one of the company trucks instead of his car because 1) it made no sense to drive *his* pride and joy over some backroad all the way to nowhere, and 2) he couldn't exactly fit all the boxes in the trunk. The company truck, however, was a super weird

shade of blue green that Steve couldn't even name, with his father's name plastered on the side.

It was fine. He kept telling himself that. Summer after graduation, make some money just driving back and forth, hauling boxes, and then—well, whatever was supposed to come next after the remarkable strangeness of the last few years. He didn't quite know what next was, but this seemed like a reprieve.

Then that goddamn Camaro sped up alongside him two weeks into summer. Steve saw it coming in the back mirror, and the second he figured out who it was, he said in a drawn-out sigh, "Shit." He wasn't even surprised. He should have known that the second things seemed normal, it would inevitably go to hell. He rolled up the window, knowing something bad was likely to happen.

The car veered around him, hovering at his side for a moment. Steve didn't do Billy the courtesy of looking down. He wasn't going to react. That psycho with his kid toucher mustache wanted to trade paint? Fine. Fine! Steve could be the better man.

After a long few seconds, the car screeched and roared past. Steve let out a groan of frustrated irritation as gravel sprayed the truck. One particularly large rock slammed into the windshield, cracks spidering out instantly. It was all Steve could do to keep the truck on the road, not panicking. He laid off the gas a little, just to let Billy get as far ahead of him as possible.

He didn't bother watching the cloud of dust disappearing down the road. He glanced at the crack, knowing his father would have a few thousand words to say on the topic. Just obnoxious enough to be dangerous. The same could be said of a pebble hitting a windshield and an idiot driving a Camaro.

One time thing, he hoped. But he'd hoped that about a lot of shit that happened in Hawkins.

Steve found out that he'd probably be seeing Billy on the road more than just the once. He was working for his own father over the

summer—doing what, Steve didn't know or care—but Steve sometimes spotted the car in Wannamaker, or on the drive out there. If he saw it coming, he'd swallow his pride and edge over to the side of the road to let it by. He wasn't having another conversation with his father about the windshield, even though he'd had no problem telling his old man about Billy and the way he drove.

"Hargrove's kid?" his father said, and the next day his father had come through the door grumbling, "If the kid's half as much a prick as his father," but hadn't finished the sentence, and Steve understood that his father had tried to talk to Billy's dad about it. That wouldn't do. He was eighteen, and maybe he couldn't legally buy a beer, but he didn't need his father settling his fights for him.

He had a bat for that, thanks.

For the most part, Steve just accepted Billy's existence on the road as a momentary annoyance. He'd turn up the radio, hook his elbow out the window, nod and hum as the wind barely ruffled his hair, and appreciate being by himself. It wasn't until the last few months that he'd realized he kind of liked that. Not having to worry about what anyone thought, what they expected from him. It was summer and he was driving. It was a pretty good deal, if you thought about it. It was normal. Steve couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten a good long stretch of normal.

Of course, when the truck blew a tire halfway back to Hawkins, Steve knew—he just *knew*—that Billy would show up that day. They didn't always see each other on the road; in fact, the last week or two, they'd managed to avoid each other entirely. But Steve, though no one would claim he was the brightest pupil to ever emerge from Hawkins High, had absorbed a couple of important things over the years.

He was plenty versed in Murphy's Law.

So when he had the jack up, loosening the nuts—something metal had punctured the wheel, and Steve wasn't looking too closely, because he just didn't want to know—and the whirl of

wheels on gravel sounded in the distance, he didn't even consider that it was someone else. Instead, he picked up his things and moved to the front of the truck, out of the way. He wasn't going to tempt Billy into smearing him across the Harrington's logo.

Steve was standing at the hood, nonchalantly rubbing some grease off his hands with a rag, when the Camaro pulled to a hard stop beside him. Steve glanced over, because it would be childish to pretend like Billy didn't exist. God, if only the bastard didn't.

Billy looked like his Christmas and birthday had been rolled into one. The fact that Steve had encountered any misfortune at all apparently delighted him to no end. "Having some trouble?"

"Do you not have some kids to terrorize or a dog to torture or something?" Steve replied.

Billy shook his head, looking pleased as punch. "Nah. Nothing to do but enjoy the view."

Steve rolled his eyes and decided to get back to work. "Asshole, if I'm the best view you've got to look at, I think it says way more about you than it does about me."

He picked up the cross wrench and crouched down by the wheel. He had his back to the Camaro, which was a pretty bold move, but at least he'd hear it if Billy opened the door.

About a minute went by. Steve kept working on the lug nuts, but he was getting more and more tense. He could *feel* Billy's eyes on the back of his head. The guy was just sitting there, watching him. It was creepy. And this came from a guy who'd seen more than his share of creepy.

Steve gritted his teeth, and went to pump the jack. The second he moved, though, something came flying at his head. He was suddenly soaked.

The Camaro took off, and Steve lifted his hands. He was dripping with cola. He could feel ice slipping down the collar of his

jean jacket.

It was such a dick move, so fucking juvenile, that Steve didn't even have the words. He bit his lip and looked down the road to the speeding Camaro. That son of a bitch was probably cackling. It was probably the happiest day of his useless existence.

Steve smoothed a hand over his wet hair, flicking off stickiness. He reminded himself that in Hawkins, it wasn't impossible for people to sometimes just get eaten.

If there was anyone who fucking deserved it...

So, a week and a half later, when he was driving a bedful of boxes back to Hawkins one evening, and he saw a car in the distance parked on the roadside, smoke or steam coming from the open hood, Steve just let himself enjoy the moment.

He slowed down the truck about a quarter mile away, unable to help the massive grin that spread across his face. It was just—just—oh man. There was a lot to be said for being the better man, but Jesus Christ, he wasn't that devoted to it.

The best part was that Billy didn't see him coming. He was too busy standing at the hood, cursing, and Steve was driving slow enough that the truck wasn't making a lot of noise. So when Billy finally heard the truck, Steve was close enough to see him step forward, hoping for help, and then realize who was actually behind the wheel.

The look on his face! The look!

Steve tried to wrestle down his smile as he pulled up alongside the car, which was steaming and not actually on fire. There was a pity. Billy still looked like he was about to punch something. He had a way of looking at you like he was about to bite your face off, but you could only see it in his eyes. Or at least, that's how Steve thought about it. Other people seemed to like the way Billy looked—chicks, mostly—but Steve had seen him like this enough times to not

really get the appeal.

It was everything he could have dreamed when Steve asked, “Having trouble?”

Immediately, Billy responded, “Eat shit and die.”

Steve shrugged, looking ahead at the road. “All right, then. You want to stay out here all night, that’s your problem, asshole.” It was coming up on 9 at night, and not a lot of chances that other drivers would be coming down this road. Not impossible, just unlikely.

“I’ve got it handled.”

Nodding, Steve glanced at the Camaro, which was billowing out a cloud. “Looks like it,” he said with pleasure.

Billy’s mouth twitched. He refused to look at Steve. Steve could practically see the guy thinking. It was probably such a rare occurrence that his brain didn’t know how to handle it.

“It’s 20 miles back to town, man,” Steve said. “Get in. Don’t make a big deal out of it.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see the conflict playing out on Billy’s face. Get in the truck, stay in the car. Get in the truck. Stay in the car.

Finally, Billy let out a god-awful snort, like he was about to spit, then took a few quick steps, reaching for the door.

Steve laid on the gas for a second, jerking the truck forward. Just enough to scare the guy. Just enough to make him think he was joking. Then he put his foot down and kept on driving.

He could hear Billy screaming at him over his own laughter. Steve raised his fist over his shoulder, middle finger proudly extended. He glanced at the rear-view mirror to make sure that Billy was as pissed as Steve was elated.

It was one of the best things he’d ever done in his life.

A few days later, Steve was coming out of a trailer in Wannamaker. He'd been there overnight, helping unload shipments, not exactly trying to prove to his father that he was more than jeans that cost too much and a lot of hairspray (not exactly but kind of; it was one of those things). He was tired but felt good. Big Al, his dad's guy in Wannamaker, he was impressed, and had said so. He'd just clapped Steve on the shoulder—his fucking aching shoulder—and was walking him out.

And they both saw it.

There was a brick through the windshield of the truck. They hadn't heard it happen, they'd just been having a beer and watching TV ("Don't tell your dad," Big Al had said before uncapping a bottle for Steve), and now this.

Steve couldn't say anything. He knew immediately what had happened, but he was just startled. He was pretty good at rolling with the punches—he'd killed actual monsters from a hell dimension or something—but it still took him off guard when people, regular people, turned out to just be *shitty*.

"God damn," said Big Al.

"Oh shit," Steve said.

Before he could do anything, Big Al was turning around and lumbering with surprising quickness back up into the trailer. "I'ma kill that kid," Steve heard him say, then the clang of a phone being grabbed up in very large hands.

Steve just stuck a hand in his hair and wished life was as easy as killing monsters.

The next night, he was driving a different truck back to Hawkins in the dark. He'd been a squeamish witness to a lot of phone calls back and forth over the last 24 hours. If he'd called his father and told him that Billy Hargrove had put a brick through the truck window, Steve

would have probably taken most of the blame for it.

But since it was Big Al who had called his father—after calling Billy’s father, and Billy’s father’s *boss*, which holy shit—Steve hadn’t had to face a second of blame. It was sort of a piss off, really. If he said something happened, then it was suspect. Big Al told his father the exact same thing and it was gospel.

Then again, his father had known Big Al a lot longer than he’d known Steve. Certainly respected him more. At one point, Steve’s father had even asked Steve if he was okay, which was a first. Steve hadn’t even known how to reply. “Yes?” he answered, and it had come out more as an incredulous question.

He had tried to make himself busy yesterday, in between watching Big Al, a usually amiable guy, tear into people via telephone. Occasionally, though, he’d been unable to avoid the shouting from the trailer, which included Big Al threatening to either call the police or pull the mullet off Billy’s head. It had been kind of rad, actually.

Now he was finally going home. He had no idea what sort of shit show was waiting for him back in Hawkins. If Billy kept escalating, like last time, Steve was probably going to get a brick to the face eventually. He’d like to think that he could hold his own. Except that last fight hadn’t really gone his way.

A kid had needed to save him. A girl, even. With Steve’s bat. That still sort of stung.

Steve drove through the night, trying not to yawn. It was dark, and he wasn’t a fan of driving out in the country at night. Not around Hawkins. Who the hell knew what you’d find out here.

Or what would find you.

He rubbed at his eyes, one hand on the wheel, and thought about life would be like. If he wasn’t here. If he was anywhere but here. Hawkins wasn’t like anywhere else. At least, that’s what he assumed. What if every little town was like this, and no one was telling?

He blew out a sigh. Great. Middle of nowhere, middle of the night. Definitely the time for deep thoughts.

When his headlights picked up the figure in the distance, Steve's spine got a quick jolt of electricity. It was just natural now. Any time he saw anything out of the ordinary, he seemed to go into 'what the hell is possibly happening now' mode. He'd seen so much weird that he wasn't sure how much more he could handle. It was one of the reasons that he kept thinking more and more about just getting the hell out of here.

There shouldn't be anyone out on the road this time of night. There weren't any houses on the road. They were back in the woods. And it was just far enough from Hawkins to be too far. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn't good.

The closer Steve got, the more his stomach dropped. Yep—it was the asshole. The silhouette of his hair gave him away. He was probably the only other guy in the town who put as much effort into his hair as Steve did.

What the fuck was he doing out on the road in the middle of the night?

Steve slowed down just enough so that he wasn't going to hit him, but not nearly enough to act like he'd stop. Even so, it gave him just enough time as he passed to see Billy for three clear seconds.

His face was bloodied and bruised. That hair he paid such meticulous care to was a disaster, like someone had grabbed it and held on while they punched him in the face. His shirt was torn. Blood dripped down his jacket. He was walking unsteadily forward, like a zombie.

The truck flew past him.

Steve didn't know what to do. He looked up into the rear-view mirror. Billy hadn't stopped, hadn't looked back. He was just walking into the dark.

For a moment, Steve felt okay about that. If anybody

deserved to get the living shit beat out of them, it was Billy Hargrove. Absolutely. 100%. No sympathy.

Except.

Things happened to people in Hawkins when they were alone. Especially at night. People got eaten. Actually eaten.

Then Steve couldn't get the idea of sharks out of his head. He had seen *Jaws* when he was way too young, and he'd lined up for the sequels too. Sharks, they smelled blood in the water from miles and miles away.

Not just sharks. All kinds of animals. It's not like there was any imminent threat in Hawkins at the moment—well, maybe, a lot of cats had disappeared in the last few weeks—but what if there was? What if there was something out there that smelled blood?

Steve brought the truck to a stop, grimacing.

He would be fine if Billy got eaten. The *world* would be fine if Billy got eaten. No one would miss him. It would be the best thing to happen to Hawkins since the laboratory got shut down.

But.

Steve, at heart, was a good guy. He knew it. He'd spent a lot of time being kind of a dick to fit in with the right people, but deep down there'd always been someone who was inclined to do the right thing. Leaving someone on the road to maybe get attacked and devoured—was not the right thing. Regardless of whether the person in question deserved it. Which the person in question really did.

Steve dropped over the wheel, shaking his head. "Fuck it," he said, frustrated with himself for what he was about to do. Just this once. He took the truck out of park and turned it around.

As he pulled up alongside Billy, the guy showed no signs of slowing down. He wasn't exactly moving quickly, but he didn't even seem to notice that he was no longer alone. Had something happened to him? Besides the obvious. Something maybe...weird?

Steve inhaled, and said, “Hey. You okay?”

At that, Billy slowed and stopped. Steve braked, and saw with deep discomfort that there were tears running down Billy’s face.

Billy turned and looked at him, dazed. “Do I *look* okay?” he said in a hoarse voice.

“No, man. You really don’t.” Billy just kept staring at him, to the point where Steve got even more uncomfortable. Clearing his throat, Steve jerked his head towards the passenger seat. “C’mon. Get in.”

“Why.”

It wasn’t even a question. Steve wasn’t sure what it was.

“Because it’s the middle of the night and you’re walking around like you got in a car crash. Did—you get in a car crash?”

“What the hell do you care?”

“I don’t,” Steve said honestly, and with a measure of relief. “I super don’t. But get in.” Billy kept standing there, eyes not quite focusing. It wasn’t that he was thinking about what to do. It’s like his brain had been shut off. *If it was ever on*, Steve couldn’t help but think. He sighed, realizing that being nice wasn’t going to get him anywhere. It simply wasn’t this guy’s language. “Listen. Asshole. You ever notice that people around Hawkins die a lot? Especially if they go out at night? You want to stay out here and just disappear, no one is really going to give a shit. That’s a promise. But I’m not the kind of guy who’d just leave someone out here. So—are you coming with me, or what? Make up your mind.”

Billy blinked a few times, some awareness coming back to his eyes. He gave his head a slight shake. “I try to get in, you’ll just drive away.”

Fair. Steve turned off the truck and raised his hands. “Look. See? Now, stop fucking around so we can get out of here.”

Shrugging, Billy asked, “What are you—afraid of the

dark?”

“Yeah. I gotta get home to my nightlight. Asshole, get moving.”

Finally, Billy started moving around the truck. Some of that animal suspicion came to his face. Steve kept his hands up the whole time, where Billy could see them.

Billy yanked the door open. He stood there a second, like he was waiting for Steve to drive away. With an eye roll, Steve said, “The engine’s off. What am I gonna do, make it move with my mind?”

Billy scowled. He was holding his left hand up to his chest, like it was hurt. The way Steve’s dog had when she got hit by a car. Billy pulled himself up into the cab, and shut the door behind himself.

Steve turned the truck on. Babysitter, good samaritan—he just kept discovering new and unwelcome things about himself. Backing up, he spun the truck in a wide circle, then they were heading back to Hawkins.

They sat in a particularly awful silence for a minute or two, before Steve said, “Where do you live?”

“Don’t fucking take me there.”

It was probably meant to sound tough, but Steve could hear actual fear there. He knew something about fear.

“Okay,” he said easily. “Where do you want to go?”

Billy didn’t reply.

Steve tried, “Do you want me to take you to Tommy’s house?” Still no answer. “I’m gonna take you to Tommy’s. You can tell him you were in a bar fight or something. He’d probably be impressed.”

There was the slightest shrug. Steve decided to interpret it

as ‘yes, I desperately want to go to Tommy’s; please dump me there and we’ll never look at each other again.’

Steve started to look for the Camaro. Part of him thought that Billy must have been going too fast on the back roads and hit a tree. Part of him didn’t believe it at all. But it was too far to be walking in the middle of the night.

After another few terrible, silent minutes, with no sign of the Camaro in the ditch, Steve asked, “So what happened to you?”

He didn’t really expect an answer. Or if he got an answer, it would probably be monosyllabic and angry. Still, Steve had to ask, from curiosity alone.

What he got was barely a murmur. “He told me to apologize.”

Steve didn’t get it. Not right away. But then he did.

“Your dad?” he said, incredulous, looking over at Billy.

Steve’s father was, occasionally—more than occasionally—kind of a prick. But he’d never given Steve more than a spanking, and not after the age of ten. Billy’s eyes were both turning purple, and there was blood coming out of his nose. He might even have split his lip. Definitely not the kind of thing that had ever happened in the Harrington house.

“Jesus Christ,” Steve muttered, more than a little disgusted.

The impossible had happened. He felt the faintest glimmer of sympathy for Billy. People who got hit that hard by their parents—well, they didn’t usually turn out normal, did they? It certainly didn’t give him a reason to be such a psycho, but it might have explained one or two of the million things wrong with the kid’s head.

“So—what, he told you to apologize to me and you just started walking? You couldn’t have gotten in your car? Or waited until tomorrow?”

“He took my keys,” Billy said in a monotone. “He told me not to come back until I apologized.”

Jesus. Steve swallowed, and said, “Yeah, well—I’ll take you over to Tommy’s. Tomorrow, you can tell your dad that—I accepted your apology.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you, man, don’t even start with me. You put a brick through the window of my dad’s truck.”

“How about I punch your face in again?”

“Unbelievable.” Steve propped up his head, shaking it. Some people, it was like talking to a wall.

“What?”

“I’m trying to be fair here, and you want to be a dick. I get that’s just your personality or whatever, but if you can’t say, ‘hey Steve, thanks for accepting my apology and giving me a ride back to town,’ then why don’t you just keep your mouth shut.”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

“Man, what is your *problem*? You’ve had it out for me since the day you got here. You want to be king of the school, hey, you got it. Congrats. Because that means a goddamn thing. Is there just something about my face that bothers you? Seriously. What did I do to piss you off?”

Billy just stared out the window. He was still cradling his hand against his chest. “Whatever.”

Steve thought of his mother. How irritated she got when he’d use that word. It really was infuriating, now that he was on the other end of it.

“Okay,” Steve announced. “No talking.”

He reached out and turned the radio on. Halfway through

'Dancing in the Dark.' Steve shrugged. Could be worse. Better than sitting here saying nothing or anything with Billy Hargrove.

"This music's for faggots."

"Yeah, I bet you like it a lot more when you see half of Van Halen's cocks in their spandex—"

The hand that came flying at his head was Billy's injured one, so Steve was able to bat it off. He slammed on the brakes before he could accidentally drive them off the road.

"Hey!" he yelped. "You want to get us both killed, or you want to not act like a crazy person for ten minutes?"

Billy was breathing heavily. "Don't call me a—"

"No one was calling you anything. I'm just trying to get us back to Hawkins without you completely spazzing out. I already regret picking you up, so you know what? If you don't want to be here, then get out. You try to hit me again while you're driving, I'll go find your sister to kick your ass."

"She's not my—"

"Save it," Steve snapped, putting the truck back into gear. "We've all heard it before."

This is what being a good guy got you. Being good meant doing things you really didn't want to do, for people who didn't deserve it. He was starting to imagine Billy being eaten by a demo-dog. It had certainly happened to better people than this dipshit.

Billy murmured, "I just want to get out of this hick town."

"Everyone wants to get out of this town," Steve replied. "Just tell me which direction you're headed so I can go the opposite way."

He felt Billy's eyes on him, but Steve ignored him, thinking of how easy it would have been to leave this guy to whatever was eating cats.

"I'm not that bad," Billy said, having the balls to almost sound hurt.

Steve let out a bark. "You are," he argued. "You're the worst. Like—the actual worst. I cannot tell you enough how much you are the worst."

That seemed to shut Billy up. Thank God. They were only a few minutes from town, and Tommy's place was even closer. Steve would physically push Billy out of the vehicle when they got there, if he had to.

Of course, there was that nagging guilt. That this guy's father had rearranged his face because Billy and Steve got in a pissing match. Which Billy had started, no mistaking. But Steve hadn't exactly acted like an adult either.

He hadn't put a brick through anyone's property, though.

It was all too complicated. He just wanted Billy out of his truck and to forget that he'd even attempted to extend an olive branch. He wanted to keep pretending like things were normal in any way, shape, or form.

After what seemed like an eternity, the lights of Hawkins started to glitter in the distance. Steve exhaled with relief. It was really hell on earth, but at the moment, it was practically paradise.

When they reached the top of the Harrises' driveway, Steve stopped the truck again. The house at the end of the tree-lined lane had a light on over the porch. Not the same as delivering Billy to his own front door, but probably safer.

"There." Steve looked at Billy from the corner of his eyes, waiting to see what he'd do. He had no idea if Billy was going to just jump out and slam the door or decide that the time was right to try and punch him in the face again. Billy did neither of those things. He sat there, face turned away from Steve. Steve was really starting to lose his patience. "Are you getting out or what?"

"You really hate me, don't you."

Raising his eyebrows, Steve tried to figure out how to reply. The obvious answer was yes, because he did. But this guy had already gotten the shit beat out of him by his own dad. It probably wasn't the time for brutal honesty.

"You don't exactly make it easy to like you," Steve said, and it was as diplomatic as he could be.

Raising his shoulders, Billy said, "All I am to you is just some asshole."

"When have you ever acted like anything else?" Billy started shaking his head. Steve was confused. He wanted Billy out of the truck—now—but Billy didn't seem inclined to go, and whatever he was trying to say, Steve was not understanding it. The last of his patience evaporated, and he said in exasperation, "What do you *want*?"

Billy took a few deep breaths. Steve tensed up, sort of leaning away. He was expecting to be punched. He was expected a fist to come sailing across the cab at him.

What he got instead was all of Billy. One second the guy was on his own side, and the next he was grabbing Steve by the front of his jacket. Steve was immediately trying to push him away, trying to figure out what it was Billy was getting at. His face was close, almost like he was going to kiss Steve. More macho intimidating bullshit, it had to be.

Except he was pushing his face closer, close enough that he and Steve were eye to eye.

Perplexed, Steve said, "*What* are you doing?"

Billy blinked, then shoved his mouth against Steve's.

If Steve was confused before, now he was flabbergasted. Billy was kissing him. It had gone from violent to—*something*—in the span of seconds. Steve was too shocked to even move. It was dark enough that he could barely see. He felt Billy touch his face, suddenly tentative. His lips were surprisingly soft.

He tasted like blood.

Steve pulled his head back, wide eyed. He wanted to open his mouth and say, ‘Uhhh,’ but he just stared instead.

Billy stared back at him. Then he shoved Steve hard. His scowl came back. “Don’t ever fucking tell anyone about this.”

They had never been in more agreement. “Yeah, no,” Steve said, eyebrows high.

Billy pushed away, then got out of the truck. He stormed away, down the road to the house.

Steve sat there, watching him. He had seen monsters. He had killed monsters. He’d seen the world underneath the world. But this—this was the weirdest thing to ever happen to him.

“What the fuck,” he said.

He drove the rest of the way home, trying to figure out what had just happened. His mind kept coming up against the facts. A guy had kissed him. Billy Hargrove had kissed him.

A guy. Billy Hargrove.

Steve parked in the garage, turning off the engine. He sat there for a few seconds, before calmly getting out and walking inside. The truth was, he didn’t know if he was being calm or going into shock.

There was a light on in the living room. “Steven?” his mother called.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Finally. I thought you’d be home earlier, so I waited up —” She came around the corner and stopped dead in her tracks. Steve stared at her, and the wildest thought came into his head. She knew. Somehow, she could just look at him and know. Everyone

would be able to look at him and know.

He, Steve Harrington, had been kissed by a man.

His mother said in horror, “Steven! What happened to your mouth?”

He almost shuddered with horror—she did know!—before touching his lips. When he pulled his thumb away, he saw blood.

Of course.

Steve opened his mouth, looking at his mother. Then he thought about every weird thing that had happened to him in the last few years.

He just plain gave up on normal.

“I got nothing,” he shrugged, and walked by her to go clean up.

They passed each other on the road again that summer, but they didn’t look at each other. Okay, Steve looked, but Billy certainly didn’t look back at him.

Steve figured that was probably for the best. Just a one time thing. A really peculiar one time thing.

Of course—that was what he said about a lot of the weird things that happened in Hawkins.

Just this once.